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Margin narrowing on Contra aid vote

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House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. yesterday predicted President Reagan's request for \$100 million in aid for the Nicaraguan resistance would be defeated, but he conceded that the administration needs to sway only about 25 votes to muscle the measure through.

Last week, the administration projected that it would lose the scheduled March 19 House vote by a 40-vote margin without additional lobbying.

At the White House, Mr. Reagan continued to rally support for his proposal.

"Freedom fighters have been battered," Mr. Reagan said of the rebels fighting Nicaragua's Marxist Sandinista regime. "You can't defend yourself against Soviet helicopter ships with bedrolls."

Through a series of White House meetings, Mr. Reagan has combined arm twisting with cajoling to try to sway key lawmakers. White House aides were working behind the scenes — and through the media — to counter criticism of the aid.

The administration effort, which pits the power of the presidency against a bitterly divided Congress, will be climaxed with a nationally televised appeal on Sunday, three days before the crucial House vote.

Mr. O'Neill, in his daily press conference, said although "the power of the president is absolutely awesome" he disagreed with Mr. Reagan's assessment that "the tide is

turning" in favor of the request.

Mr. Reagan remains steadfastly opposed to any request to modify the proposal and called the measure modest when compared to the \$500 million in aid given to the Nicaraguan communists by the Soviet bloc.

"When you are talking to the president, the most powerful man in the world, you can't deny" his persuasive ability, Mr. O'Neill said, adding that he was also opposed to modifying the request — but for a different

reason.

"I'm bitterly opposed," he said. "There is no compromise as far as I'm concerned. I know nothing of negotiations. If they negotiate on the Senate bill, it is a repudiation of the president."

In apparent reference to a proposal by Sen. Jim Sasser, Tennessee Democrat, Mr. Reagan told a press luncheon yesterday: "I'll listen to any proposal that anyone wants to make that is tied to the idea of letting us come to the aid of these Contras."

On March 3, Mr. Sasser said that the rebels should be given \$30 million in humanitarian aid now, but the proposed \$70 million in military assistance should be withheld for six months. Holding the money in abeyance, Mr. Sasser believes, would be a stimulus for the Sandinistas to come to the negotiating table.

Mr. Reagan said holding the money "would destroy the morale of the Contras. I don't think that would

be a compromise I could listen to at all."

House Majority Leader Jim Wright said that Mr. Reagan may be cajoling more votes through his personal efforts and "there may be some pickup on the president's side since the appointment of [special envoy Philip] Habib ... but it is remarkable he did not do anything until two weeks ago."

Mr. Wright said House critics say if the president is serious about negotiating, "why didn't he" do it last year.

Despite the rhetoric on both sides, some senior administration officials implied that there might be some small area for compromise on the amount of U.S. military assistance — but none involving any strings or delays.

Sen. Patrick Leahy, Vermont Democrat, said the "well-orchestrated publicity" campaign by Mr. Reagan, and White House Communications Director Patrick Buchanan "dares to impugn our pa-

triotism in opposing a failed and discredited policy."

Referring to an article that Mr. Buchanan wrote last week, Mr. Leahy, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Intelligence Committee, said "this gross and repellent red-baiting does contain one truth: we are faced with stark choices." He urged colleagues to work against the aid package.

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, Kansas Republican, said at the White House yesterday after meeting with Mr.

Reagan that he did not sway her sentiment and she joined in chastizing Mr. Buchanan's view that a vote against the aid measure would be a vote for Sandinista President Daniel Ortega.

Mr. Reagan said the talk of compromise for smaller amounts of aid, delay and restrictions and "all the usual temporizing and quibbling" should be put aside.

"Those who would compromise must not compromise the freedom fighters' lives nor their immediate defensive needs," Mr. Reagan said. "They must not compromise America's democracies or our own southern borders. They must not compromise freedom."

The president repeated his posi-

tion that the U.S. has no thought of sending American troops to Nicaragua. But he said there could come a day "where we were under hostile attack ourselves because the cancer that is Nicaragua would have been allowed to spread until it could target things of interest to us and our national security in the Caribbean."

He quoted a Sandinista official as stating that the U.S. could expect to see them at the borders of Arizona and New Mexico. This, he said, is the threat that raises the possibility of American forces facing hostile actions.

On one key point Mr. O'Neill, vehemently agreed with Mr. Reagan: "This is not a Democratic or Republican fight. This is an American fight. I don't think that rag-tag band could withstand the Sandinistas if you gave them \$1 billion."

"You ought to go the diplomatic route of Contadora," Mr. O'Neill said. "The argument down there from everyone I've talked to is go the Contadora route. We haven't given full faith to the Contadora method. This can be done by diplomacy."

The Contadora countries — Colombia, Mexico, Panama and Venezuela — have been working together since January 1983 for a regional solution to the turmoil in Central America.